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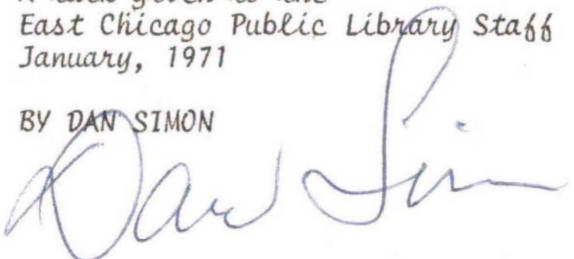


HISTORY OF THE  
*EAST CHICAGO*  
HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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A talk given to the  
East Chicago Public Library Staff  
January, 1971

BY DAN SIMON

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Dan Simon". The signature is fluid and cursive, with "Dan" on the left and "Simon" on the right, connected by a horizontal line.

A morose jester once commented that "Life in East Chicago exactly illustrates what Thomas Hobbes said about the life of man in a state of nature: solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short." My talk is designed to make some of these adjectives inapplicable and to show that the East Chicago Public Library is a help in dissolving this view, to share information with you and to have a little fun.

You may take some satisfaction in knowing that it was the East Chicago Public Library which sponsored and gave impetus to the organizing of the Historical Society in 1966.

Mrs. Ezelyn Johnston called our attention to the need for gathering the source materials of the city's history while they are still available. This is a type of responsibility every library bears in whatever city it is located. It seemed appropriate to form a Society for this purpose as part of our celebration of Indiana's Sesquicentennial year. Indiana, you recall, was carved out of the Northwest Territory in 1816, and 1966 found East Chicago almost 75 years old with little collated knowledge of the growth and development of this community. It is quite new, relatively speaking, in Indiana history: a 20th century industrial society.

For my format, let me dip into T. S. Eliot who stated: "I have known mornings, evenings and afternoons./ I have measured out my life with coffee spoons." Let me spoon out the start, then the effect and follow with some directions of our group.

The Historical Society organizing committee helped combine an opportunity for celebrating the Sesquicentennial with the library's professional responsibility to gather the source materials which students and scholars would need for reference in studying this unique city.

We are one of the very few such cities in Indiana, and in fact East Chicago is a microcosm of the industrial development of the nation. We are to the nation what a drop of water is to a lake, highly concentrated. The industries, the location, the people, and the development produced during these years are unique when contrasted with most communities of the country.

Who were the organizers? Melvin Specter, a member of your library board; George Huish, who knows as much about the city through his pioneer family and the papers he put out as anyone in East Chicago; Audrey Davis, another citizen of a pioneer family; Willard Van Horne, Jr., who with his father, has given the city 70 years of law service; Richard Smith, a history buff specializing in the Civil War period; Edith Wickey Zoeger, whose father and grandfather figured prominently in the city's early years; Paul Zahara, who grew up here and is now an officer in the Riley bank; Mrs. Margaret Jones and Mrs. Ezelyn Johnston, librarians you know; John Fox, a school administrator, whose family pioneered in Indiana Harbor; with Henning Forsberg joining us a bit later; Rose Levan, a library user who looks upon libraries as the handmaiden of history and who has helped research on our history; and myself, Dan Simon, to whom libraries and history are also important, especially as an educational institution.

What drove us? Nostalgia, love of the town and for some a desire to return. Though Thomas Wolfe had it that "You Can't Go Home Again" the Society was a home to return to for many former East Chicagoans.

We met in the basement meeting room of the Baring Avenue Library to work out the details of organization. Melvin Specter did the legal work to write and register the charter of incorporation. Our first general meeting was in May, 1966. Since then we have had four annual dinners, a quarterly meeting and many board meetings; we published the Diamond Jubilee Record during 1968 to mark East Chicago's 75th anniversary; we sold commemorative plates for the occasion, and made efforts to collect histories from every ethnic group making up our population and family histories.

We have quite a way to go before we get all the materials pertinent to the city's history. It takes time for individuals as well as groups to write up their own stories. So every once in a while we nurture as well as nudge them so that they do not forget to let the Society have the papers, copies of documents, pictures, diaries and other memorabilia pertaining to East Chicago. The Society's archives (we historians love to use this word) are in the Library, since the Library is the repository and resource center for all who want this information. The old catalog room in the Grand Boulevard Library has been made available to us by courtesy of the Library Board for a meeting place and workroom.

We have already been of some service to researchers. Often we do not yet have specific materials but on occasion we do as when Purdue sociologists making a survey here some time ago found what they needed in material we had.

The Society is also making some headway into the task of preserving voice records of people. Mrs. Lydia Brenneman has a tape recorder and is working on interviewing and getting tape recordings of the reminiscenses of people, especially those who had had a long role in the life of this city.

Why do we think this is important? To know where you've been helps to know where you are and how you might go to where you want to go. We should know our background. How do we go about it? It was what we couldn't do that determined what we should. We found, first of all, that we couldn't operate as an antiquarian society, as many historical societies are. As cities go, East Chicago is young. We have not been involved in early American history so that either, like eastern societies we have museums filled with relics of romantic revolutionary days, or as in the west, we can fill museums with artifacts from goldmining, lawless, covered wagon days. We came too late for that. Nor could we do as some other societies, sponsor diggings into prehistory for dinosaur bones, old Indian settlements, or prehistoric peoples. East Chicago is built on swamp and marshland. Any dinosaur bones under the marshy remains would be pretty hard to get to.

But we have one significant story of development. This is the story of our--and America's--industrial development and its expansion as a multi-national and multi-racial community in the service of building an American stronghold. This is where East Chicago contributes a footnote--or perhaps even a chapter: the development of basic industries--steel, oil refining, metals refining, building materials, air products and even man-made gems. This city in its 11-square miles and a little less than half a hundred thousand people is a national workshop where its products, often poetically referred to as the "sinews of the nation" are of critical importance to the national economy. These are the industries which have directly involved products as well as people in the nation's national and international activity.

This story, the materials documenting it, has been asked for already by scholars trekking to the Indiana State Library, according to John Newman, archivist and field representative. We have agreed to let him have copies of whatever materials he wants for the State Library.

Is industry and its development all that is to be noted? No, not at all. For if we stop there, we miss the real history, the people who made it.

Let's take a bird's eye view of our beginnings. In 1816 this area was a swampy wasteland for which an agricultural society had no use. It was only good farm land that counted then. In 1851 when the Indiana delegates to a constitutional convention wrote the state's second charter (under which we still operate, by the way) they set up a system of

public schools. Money for these schools was to come from the sale of northwest Indiana lands. This land sold at 2¢ an acre. First buyers were the railroad companies and speculators, making rail and financial connections between New York and Chicago, a real boom town to the west of us. An old map of 1897 shows the many railroad lines that went through East Chicago at this time. East Chicago was the largest of several communities in the county: Hobart, Dyer, Griffith, and Highland were hardly more than farm centers; and neither Gary or Indiana Harbor were even thought of.

With the railroads to Chicago, it wasn't long before Chicago financiers who had a lively interest in manufacturing, saw possibilities for industry in this wasteland swamp. The combination of rail and water transportation offered easy movement of raw materials and products. Thus came engineers and land salesmen to build a canal, a railroad belt line, facilities which attracted the steel plants, oil refineries, chemical plants, metals reduction and fabricating industries. Some steel industries had been in East Chicago prior to 1900, as the LaSalle and Republic companies. But the boom really began with Inland Steel in 1902.

With the industries came a demand for people to work in them. At first those attracted were from the eastern steelmaking centers, Pennsylvania and New York. More workers were needed and the companies invited people from Europe through agents. I think Melvin Specter's uncle was one of them.

These workers were from northern European countries at first, then from Southern Europe. The great influx of so many nationalities must have made things hectic on the Indiana Harbor side of town since there were few who could speak English.

In 1914 when immigration was cut off because of the beginning of World War I workers were attracted from the South, from Canada, and from Mexico. The war period over and immigration restricted, workers from the South increased. Later people again came from Mexico and also Puerto Rico.

The Tower of Babel that must have been East Chicago in this period from 1900 to 1920 was called a "melting pot" society by the poet and dramatist Israel Zangwill. However, we never really "melted." Yet Americans were developed, and the greatest credit must go to the school system, difficult as it was then --struggling with an almost impossible problem of teaching such a great variety of children from so many backgrounds who didn't know the language. We had one reminder from a member of the Society who had been a pupil in the Lincoln School when it was first opened, the first in Indiana Harbor. She said she was the only child in the whole class who could speak English. (The lady was Mrs. Davis, now deceased).

The 1960 census indicated that we have people from 59 different countries, although only a few individuals represent some of them. Ethnic groups tended to cluster around their churches. (And some around their taverns, which were often named to convey the idea of an

ethnic home, like "Hrvatski Dom" for instance.)

The government of the city in time listed ethnic names as the newcomers learned to cope with English speech. The public schools were the key to such Americanization. There were, it is true, many church schools which helped to keep ethnic groups together for fellowship later on, but they also tended to isolate groups so that there was not the "melt" which Zangwill predicted. However, on the credit side, the groups brought with them and preserved their own cultures which they proudly contributed to the American scene. They have become devoted Americans, intermarried and often in tracing a family's lineage now, many a family finds it has become a little United Nations.

Clubs and organizations, churches and ethnic communities within the community add to the richness of East Chicago life. Consider just one field, that of food and cooking. We now have kapusta, stuffed cabbage, sauerkraut, pierogi, stroganoff, pizza, grits and greens, ravioli, macaroni, borscht, kielbasa or Polish turkey, tacos, kolaches, Southern fried chicken, chop suey, mamaliga, palacsintas, chow mien, shish kabob, Swedish pancakes and meat balls, all as American as apple and pumpkin pie. What's more, we love to try cooking and dishes from every country under the sun, as your library collection of cookbooks testifies.

You could trace the same sort of interchange and adaptation in the arts--the dances, theater, and the social customs, and even business and politics--which provide us with such infinite, delightful variety.

To get all these stories of people in their own groups and their own organizations we feel is the essence of what we should preserve. People are a nation's greatest resource, a concept which has now become a cliche. When we have such a mixture as we have in East Chicago, all contributing some special ingredient, we are bound to have, eventually, a very special kind of American civilization and society. Or to go back to the cooking terminology, all these ingredients baked in an American milieu should come out a very special cake.

So these source materials will help later students and scholars to know how the actual process operated.

Because the Historical Society cuts across every line that has divided people in the past and concentrates only on our common bonds of citizenship and local experiences, we are in the best position to unify East Chicagoans. We are not ethnic, not political, not self-interested. So that many of us feel we have a gold mine of enjoyment in the human relationships we share. We shall explore that this year.

We can sum it up this way for the Society: we are happy in the realization that our program fulfills the responsibility of the Library to have the source materials of the city's history. We are happy also to be able to anticipate the needs of future historians, sociologists and scholars for these materials we know they will want. But most of all, we like to think that we are helping to strengthen the library as the cultural transmission to the future on which civilization depends for development.

This is a lofty sentiment, perhaps; but it seems to us that Socrates' dictum--"Know Thyself" (Gnothe seuton)--applies to larger groups of people in nations and societies. "Know thy people, and thy species--mankind." To historians and to people interested in what the past has to teach the future, this is as vital as knowing who you are. And perhaps also, where you are going.

A last word: we hope you will wish to join the Society and help us achieve what we should.

